

Available online at www.jmle.org

The National Association for Media Literacy Education's
Journal of Media Literacy Education 2:3 (2011) 252 - 255

Professional Resource:

Media Construction of Global Warming (2010)

Stine Eckert

Philip Merrill College for Journalism, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

Media Construction of Global Warming (2010)

By Chris Sperry, Dan Flerlage and Alexander Papouchis
Project LookSharp, Division of Interdisciplinary and
International Studies, Ithaca College, New York

Recently I taught an introductory media literacy discussion section on analyzing race, gender, advertising, and war coverage (among other topics). Most students were freshmen coming from a wide variety of majors including architecture, music, biology and so on. Many students experienced eye-opening moments as we talked about how media cover plastics: They were surprised about the low recycling rate of plastics, the health concern over bisphenol A in certain kinds of plastics and the industry-created need to buy water in plastic bottles. The students watched *The Story of Bottled Water* <http://storyofstuff.org/bottledwater/> (The Story of Stuff 2010) and in their homework many expressed surprise and concern over the environmental impact of plastics but also over a lack of wider media coverage on the issue. Although my students didn't have trouble finding articles on plastics online (a requirement for the homework), it was the first time many thought about how media choose to report on the environment. This would have provided a good segue to discuss how media cover larger environmental problems with the help of the curriculum *Media Construction of Global Warming (2010)*, developed by Project LookSharp.

Project LookSharp is a media literacy curricular initiative created by the Division of Interdisciplinary and International Studies at Ithaca College, New York. The project currently offers 14 free curricula modules to teach media literacy on topics ranging from the Middle East, war, peace, and global media to resource depletion, chemicals in the environment, endangered species and global warming. LookSharp developed these teaching materials

between 2005 and 2010; they mostly target middle school to college students. Each curriculum follows a similar format but varies in the number of lessons. Thus, the materials of Project LookSharp offer useful tools to not only teach media literacy but also critical and analytical thinking by weaving these skills in with other core topics. The initiative, in keeping with one of its primary goals, has developed a model to include media literacy in different instructional areas for a wide range of grade levels.



One of the recent curricula modules developed by LookSharp is *Media Construction of Global Warming*, which creatively teaches the debate about the existence of global warming: what is fact and myth? How have media reported about global warming for the past fifty years? What are causes and consequences of global warming? What is a carbon footprint? Chris Sperry, Dan Flerlage and Alexander Papouchis developed the 338-page package to target students in upper high school and college classes in English, media studies, social science, and science. The authors designed eight lessons varying in classroom time from 40 minutes to 90 minutes.

The introduction to the curriculum points out *Lesson 1: Framing the Debate*, *Lesson 3: Discourse or Disinformation?*, and *Lesson 8: A History of Global Warming* as the most useful ones to teach in media classes. In all lessons, however, students are to reflect on the source of information and the perspectives of the authors to arrive at their own critical conclusions. Since every lesson consists of distinct elements, teachers can mix and match exercises and activities – a thoughtful design to allow teachers flexibility if only one or two class sessions are dedicated to media coverage of the environment as happened in my class rather than an entire quarter or semester.



The first lesson of the global warming curriculum challenges the students to think about their own idea of global warming: Do they believe it exists or not? Where do they get their information from about global warming? After answering these questions on paper and discussing them in class, Lesson 1: Framing the Debate presents a four-minute trailer of Leonardo diCaprio's film *The 11th Hour* (Global Warning) and two-minute clip of Glenn Beck's TV special *Exposed: Climate of Fear*. Both videos were published in 2007 and it might be useful to substitute them for more recent examples if available. The clips, however, neatly summarize the two broader arguments in the global warming debate: *The 11th Hour* focuses on the anthropogenic cause of global warming outlining the addiction of society on oil which causes carbon pollution leading to erratic weather. *Exposed* picks up where *The 11th Hour*

ends, blaming sensational media coverage of weather phenomena to create a false understanding of global warming. In work sheets provided by the website, students then answer the following questions about the videos:

- Who produced and who sponsored the message?
- Who is the target audience?
- What message does it give about global warming?
- What techniques does it use to communicate those messages?
- Are the messages credible? Why do you think that?
- Who might benefit from this message? Who might be harmed?

The 35-minute lesson concludes with a class discussion to compare the two clips based on the students' answers. This lesson is a good starting point for a larger debate on science or environmental journalism but would also work on its own in a media literacy class discussing many topics such as my discussion section did. The work sheets to guide their analysis would have helped my freshmen to focus on the background of the clips and to justify their opinion as many found it hard to explain why they agree or not.



In *Lesson 3: Discourse or Disinformation?* students are asked to analyze documents to retrace the editing of information on global warming. This lesson is particularly useful for media literacy as it demonstrates the construction of information and news as a cultural process: How do politicians and journalists translate scientific results into everyday language? What happens during this process? One of the four activities of the 90-minute lesson asks the students to read an excerpt of a report by the congressional Subcommittee on Global Climate Change Research. The excerpt shows White House official Philip Cooney's hand-written edits. With the help of a work sheet, students are asked to compare the edits to the original to discuss in class the differences and what they mean. Similarly, students are to compare two articles from the Wall Street Journal

and Nature magazine to analyze perspectives. Both of the activities would work on their own independent of the entire LookSharp curriculum on global warming.

Lesson 8: A History of Global Warming in Science, Politics and the Media might also serve as an introduction as class room time can range between 50 minutes and two hours. This lesson uses 52 slides, which easily opened in Power Point software, presenting a plethora of dated and sourced covers, articles, reports, polls, comics and photographs to teach visually how media portrayed global warming between the 1950s through 2010. The teacher's guide offers detailed explanations and background information for each slide including possible student answers – a plentiful resource to present past media coverage on global warming with concrete examples.

0:01:01

What trends or developments do you see reflected in these magazine covers?

What significant trends or developments appear in these New York Times headlines from 2007 to 2010?

| |
|--|
| <p><i>Public Remains Split on Response to Warming</i> April 27, 2007</p> |
| <p><i>Gore Shares Peace Prize for Climate Change Work</i> Oct. 13, 2007</p> |
| <p><i>Melting Pace of Glaciers is Accelerating, Report Says</i> March 20, 2008</p> |
| <p><i>Survey Shows Gap Between Scientists and the Public</i> July 10, 2009</p> |
| <p><i>Obama Aide Concedes Climate Law Must Wait</i> Oct. 3, 2009</p> |
| <p><i>In Face of Skeptics, Experts Affirm Climate Peril</i> Dec. 7, 2009</p> |
| <p><i>Global and Local Concerns Meet in 'Hopenhagen'</i> Dec. 11, 2009</p> |
| <p><i>China Insists That Its Steps on Climate Be Voluntary</i> Jan. 30, 2010</p> |

The curriculum on *Media Construction of Global Warming* is a convenient and valuable teaching tool. The website <http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp/?action=middleeast> is well organized with an intuitive layout easy to navigate. The clear structures of the website, the curricula, and each lesson make it easy for teachers to cherry-pick lesson elements for different class durations and for group, pair or individual work. The materials offer a creative selection of concrete examples in form of articles, video clips, covers and so on to engage the students. First-time teachers and instructors with little time to prepare their lessons or striving to stay flexible in their schedule but needing a back-up basic guide should have a look at Project LookSharp. The only draw back in the material is the low quality of the video clips, which unfortunately doesn't improve on the Project LookSharp YouTube channel. If possible these videos are perhaps better found independently. Another idea to enhance the website would be to add a running list of relevant newspaper and magazine articles for each curriculum (especially for the older ones). What makes Project LookSharp, however, a very helpful teacher's guide is its approach and design to have the students find out knowledge for themselves to draw their own conclusions. By analyzing original documents and calculating carbon footprints for clothing, hamburgers, and cars themselves to compare the social reality with "green" media messages, I think my students would experience more eye-opening experiences as they did when they counted the type of plastics in their supermarkets. The more the students can do their own original research on items they use and care about, the more it will strike home how important media messages are in relation to what they find to be true.

References

- Ithaca College. 2010. "Media construction on global warming". Division of Interdisciplinary and International Studies. Project LookSharp. http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp/?action=global_warming
- The Story of Stuff. 2010. "The Story of Bottled Water." <http://storyofstuff.org/bottledwater/>